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LA Times

TUESDAY, MARCH 17, 1998

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Water Canal Plan, Debate Resurface

■ **Policy:** Proposal, twice killed by voters, is billed as one way to rescue San Joaquin Delta. It would create loop around area into Southern California.

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SACRAMENTO—Hide the children and the faint of heart, the Peripheral Canal debate has officially resumed.

That politically incendiary plan to build a loop around the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to help bring Northern California water to Southern California, is again being discussed publicly by water wonks.

It happened Monday when officials of CalFed, the state and federal effort to rescue the delta from its myriad problems, released a 3,500-page tome detailing three competing plans.

Two of the plans would widen some of the delta channels. But there it was, bold as ever, in alternative No. 3: a canal to link the Sacramento River and the State Water Project by bypassing the delta.

True, it's been re-christened the Open Channel Isolated Facility, but it is the same basic idea that has divided the state for half a century.

Monday also signaled the start of a 75-day period of 12 hearings from Redding to San Diego to seek public opinion on the three alternatives.

The decision on which alternative to select will be made by Gov. Pete Wilson and U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt.

But Wilson and Babbitt want to be sure there is political support for whatever plan is selected. Which means that canal supporters, particularly the mighty Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, have 75 days to overcome decades of distrust by rivals.

What neither state nor federal officials want is a repeat of 1982, when state voters defeated the Peripheral Canal measure, just as they did in 1964.

In 1982, support in Southern California was lukewarm, opposition in Northern California was steadfast, and the fight was one of the nastiest in a state whose history is marked by water fights.

The renewed debate will test

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whether the rural-urban, state-federal, farmer-environmentalist, north-south coalition that has backed CalFed can endure.

The 738,000-acre delta provides drinking water for 22 million Californians and irrigation for the state's \$24-billion agricultural industry. But the delta is being strangled by flooding, siltation and seawater intrusion from the San Francisco Bay.

The reports released Monday indicate that a canal would provide a higher quality of water for Southern California, keep fish from being sucked into the current State Water Project pipes at the south end of the delta, and ensure San Joaquin Valley farmers a reliable supply of water.

But Northern Californians have worried that the MWD might use a canal to literally suck the Sacramento River dry by demanding the full 2 million acre-feet of water the MWD is assured under the State Water Project.

And then there is the concern that if its water no longer came through the delta, the MWD and other Southern California political interests might forsake the delta and its problems.

During the 75 days, MWD will be negotiating with Northern California water districts, environmental groups, the agricultural industry and business leaders to allay those historic fears.

"Southern California has to be able to offer up assurances that the system will not go out of control," said Tim Quinn, the MWD's deputy general manager. "We need to eliminate the fear factor. That's the engine that has driven the controversy: fear of Southern California."

The spirit of Monday's event was that—regardless of which alternative is selected—the competing interests in California's water wars should be prepared to compromise or risk killing the watershed that is the lifeblood of the state's economy and environment.

"This may be our last opportunity for decades to solve our water problems in California," said California Secretary of State Bill Jones.

The boldest of the proposals is the alternative to construct a 44-mile earthen canal so that water from the Sacramento River would enter the State Water Project near Byron, bypassing the salty and marshy delta. The canal would be half the size of that planned in 1982—a reduction aimed at lessening opposition.

Every California governor from Goodwin Knight to Wilson has, at one point in his administration, spoken of the need for such a canal.

The canal alternative appears to offer something for everyone: water storage for farmers, wetlands restoration and wildlife protection for environmentalists, and a canal for Southern California.

But it also carries something to anger each group: Environmentalists are fearful of increased reser-

voirs because that means more dams; farmers are leery at agreeing to convert fields to wetlands; and so forth.

There are indications that water politics have shifted since the 1982 fight.

For openers, the farming industry and some Northern California leaders are rethinking their 1982 opposition. One reason is that in 1982 the canal idea was a stand-alone proposal, now it's part of a package.

Rich Golb, executive director of the Northern California Water Assn., which represents Northern Sacramento Valley water agencies, said his group is willing to consider a canal if there are assurances that it will not be used to deplete the Sacramento River.

Sunne McPeak, a former Contra Costa supervisor who led the Northern California opposition to the Peripheral Canal in 1982, is co-chairman of a CalFed advisory committee.

Like Golb, she's willing to consider a canal idea because, unlike in 1982, it also includes plans for flood control, conservation, water sales between districts, and increased storage.

Still, environmental groups are unhappy about the CalFed process and the canal idea.

Ronnie Ann Cohen, resource specialist with the San Francisco-based Natural Resources Defense Council, said her group does not think CalFed planners have done enough to promote conservation and instead seem to be fixated on "dams and ditches."